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De luchtvaart van Alexander de Grote in de verbeelding der Middeleeuwen.

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SUMMARY

The story of Alexander the Great's Aerial Flight holds a special position among the manifold legendary traditions around the famous world conqueror that were known during the Middle Ages, since no other legend of his miraculous life was represented so often in art as this one. According to the legend Alexander had travelled through the sky in a vehicle drawn by griffins, which he had lured upward by holding meat in front of them.

A review of the existing literature on the subject, notably the monograph by Chiara Settis-Frugoni (Settis-Frugoni 1973), reveals that we still need a study of the origin, meaning and development of the various visual traditions in Western Medieval art, based upon a *corpus* of all the images that are known at present. Especially the images of the Flight in the manuscripts of Latin and French works about Alexander need to be studied in full. The Alexander imagery in illustrated manuscripts and incunabula from Germany and the Low Countries has been dealt with by D.J.A. Ross (Ross 1971). Whereas his main object is the study of picture cycles, I will focus on the pictorial types of the Flight. Other items which particularly need to be discussed are the relation between the visual type of the Flight in Romanesque art to that in Byzantine art; the relation between the former type to similar images of a figure between two animals; and the meaning of this type.

The method followed to study the meaning of the images of the Flight partly depends on the nature of the material discussed, and will be explained in its proper place. Throughout the book, however, I use the following notions. To clarify the origin of a certain visual type I use the concept of the 'encompassing theme' or *Rahmenthema* (see Białostocki, espec. 144-149), and to analyze the visual types themselves and the differences between them I employ the distinction made by Schapiro between a 'theme of state' and a 'theme of action' (Schapiro 1973).

The first chapter deals with the images in Romanesque art. First a short outline of the literary transmission of the story is given (p.7-12). The most important work in this respect is a Latin translation, made by an archpriest Leo of Napels, probably between 951 and 959, of the (lost) 8*-redaction of a Greek Alexander Romance known to scholarship as Pseudo-Callisthenes. There are, however, clear indications that the legend was already known in the West by the 9th c., and probably even earlier.

The Flight is the only episode in Alexander's life that was also represented outside the context of Alexander cycles in illustrated manuscripts. As such the image is predominantly found in Romanesque art (12th-early 13th cs.), especially in architectural sculpture and mosaic pavements of churches and monasteries. Representations are known from the Meuse valley (cat.no. 83), England (cat.no. 5), Germany (cat.nos. 10, 21, 81, 86-87), Switzerland (cat.no. 1), Italy (cat.nos. 3-4, 9, 14, 16-17, 19, 24-25, 90) and France (cat.nos. 6, 15, 18, 20, 23). In Spain the story was apparently not represented, and the so-called images of the Flight in Scandinavia have been rightly dismissed as highly dubious. As an independent image the Flight also occurs in the art of the Byzantine Empire and limitrophe areas such as Russia (10th-14th cs.).

In Romanesque art the Flight is usually represented according to a fixed and simple scheme: Alexander sits frontally in or on a vehicle (often a throne, sometimes

theme of Alexander's Flight extensively, puts forward the most nuanced hypothesis, arguing that the Flight was regarded in France in a positive way, whereas in Germany, and partly in Italy too, it was considered as an example of pride. The main problem here is, however, that the images in France do not basically differ from those in Germany, which suggests that all of them had a similar meaning (p.39).

Before attempting a new interpretation it is necessary to look at the story again. It is argued here that there was a clear connection between Alexander and *mirabilia*, because of the marvellous things he was supposed to have seen and done. Already by the end of the 10th c. these wonder stories must have been very popular, and the legend of the Flight was very likely one of the most popular of these. If one assumes that, it becomes at least understandable why this particular story was represented so often as an independent image during the following centuries (p.40-46).

A basic feature of this image is, as said above, the frontality of the Alexander figure. It is likely that the frontality is used here as **an artistic mode of presenting a transcendent figure or a sacred theme of state** (Schapiro 1973, 32). This implies that Alexander is not only being elevated, but also being exalted. The representation of the Flight is, in other words, an apotheosis-like image. One can imagine that such a global meaning befits a secular work as the embroidery in Würzburg (cat.no. 87). But the same pictorial form is maintained in representations of the Flight in churches and monasteries. This suggests that the image in both a secular and a religious context had a similar meaning (p.47).

With these considerations in mind it is attempted to deduce the intended meaning of the images from their visual context. That is to say, not only from their purely iconographical context, but from their total context, since one should take such factors as the location of the images and the image carrier into account as well. From this, more functionalist rather than purely iconographic, approach it follows that the material is arranged according to architectural sculpture in cloisters (p.49-52); tympana (p.52-58); floor mosaics (p.58-67); and architectural sculpture in church interiors (p.67-72). As a matter of course fragments, and images of which their original context has been greatly altered or of which their present location is doubtful, are not discussed in full (cat.nos. 3, 9, 18, 20, 23, 81, 83). Likewise little ink is spilt on those images of which it seems *a priori* doubtful whether they had any clear meaning at all, although they are still *in situ* (cat.nos. 4-6, 16-17).

The result of this discussion is that the image of the Flight can be interpreted as the expression of a longing for heaven and hence as a reference to the heavenly bliss enjoyed by the faithful in the hereafter. Conclusive evidence for this hypothesis is admittedly lacking. There are only hints which, when taken together, make this interpretation more probable than the common opinion that the Flight was regarded as an example of pride.

It would be wrong, though, to suppose that the secular aspects did not play a role at all when the image was depicted in a religious context. There was, as was argued above, a great deal of interest in wonder stories such as that of the Flight. The image agrees with this popularity and is an expression of it. The reasons for this interest, however, are difficult to grasp. The age-old dream of flight may have been a factor, the fact that Alexander's Flight was a dangerous adventure another. Griffins were thought of as ferocious animals, and the sheer fact that Alexander succeeded in taming them may have heightened the interest in the story. Alexander has something of a 'master of animals' indeed. Such aspects may have played an important role, even

with those images of which it may be doubted, judging by their visual context, whether they had a clear, that is to say religious meaning. **The alternatives are not, as is often supposed, religious meaning or no meaning, but religious or secular meanings, both laden with affect** (Schapiro 1980, 179-181).

In the course of the 13th c. the Flight, as an independent image, was represented more and more rarely. Its disappearance can be explained by the rise of the new order of Gothic architecture and the gradual emergence of a more fixed and systematic iconography of church decoration. For a single image like the Flight there was apparently no room any more (p.74-76).

But an image, once invented, dies hard. During the 14th and 15th cs. the Flight made its reappearance on misericords, which surprisingly enough are all located in England (cat.nos. 2, 7-8, 11-13, 22, 26-27). It is a true survival of the old image, as the representations still follow the old scheme of composition, unlike the contemporary manuscript illustrations, for which new types had been created in the meantime. On these stalls Alexander was never to take a soaring flight again; under the seats of numerous English canons he finally found a truly humble end.

From the 13th c. onwards new pictorial types of the Flight were created in manuscripts as part of a cycle illustrating the life of Alexander. These new pictorial types are the subject of Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 focuses on the images of the Flight in the manuscripts of the various versions of the so-called *Historia de Preliis*, the epic *Roman d'Alexandre* (ca. 1185), the *Roman d'Alexandre en prose* (13th c.) and the *Histoire du bon roy Alixandre* by Jean Wauquelin (before 1440). The next chapter deals with the illustrations in the manuscripts of German works.

The method adopted in these chapters to study the images differs from that of the previous chapter because of the different nature of the material. First an interpretation of the episode in a particular work will be given, taking into account the literary tradition. Then it will be investigated if a pictorial type peculiar to the manuscripts of the work under discussion was created, and if so, how it conveys the meaning of the episode in the text. This interpretation will be given profile through a comparison of this type with the older Romanesque tradition and with the pictorial types of the Flight in manuscripts of other works. Finally, the further development of the type will be traced.

But before any interpretation can be attempted it is necessary to examine whether there existed a tradition of illustrating the manuscripts of a particular work about Alexander with a picture cycle at all. This is by no means self-evident, as appears from the manuscripts of the various versions of the *Historia de Preliis*.

Leo's Latin translation of the δ^* -redaction of Pseudo-Callisthenes and the interpolated versions known as the *Historia de Preliis* were of prime importance for the literary transmission of the Flight, but played a rather unimportant role in the pictorial tradition. Few manuscripts contain pictures, and fewer still contain an illustration of the Flight. There are only three of these: a South Italian manuscript of the third quarter of the 13th c. in Leipzig (cat.no. 38); a late 14th c. Bohemian manuscript in Prague (cat.no. 70); and an early 14 c. South Italian manuscript in Paris (cat.no. 66). Two other manuscripts have an open space for an illustration of the Flight which was never executed (cat.nos. 67 and 72). The number of illustrated *Historia de Preliis* manuscripts is very small indeed in comparison with the many unillustrated manuscript that have survived. Hence one cannot speak of a special

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tradition for the illustration of these texts. For works in the vernacular on the other hand, like the *Roman d'Alexandre*, the *Roman d'Alexandre en prose*, such a tradition does exist. Illustrated manuscripts of secular Latin texts are generally rare, and although their number increased from the 13th c. onwards, it remained relatively small, whereas secular texts in the vernacular were illustrated during the same period on a far more extensive scale (p.83-93).

The existence of a tradition of illustrating the manuscripts of a particular work about Alexander with a picture cycle is important, because it appears that together with the rise of such a tradition a new pictorial type of the Flight was also created. The few illustrations of the Flight that turn up in manuscripts of other works containing the episode can be related to one of these new pictorial types (see p. 107-108, 125-127, 152-157). When these new types were apparently unknown artists continued to adhere to the old formula current in Romanesque art. This happened in the Leipzig and Prague manuscripts of the *Historia de Preliis* I² (Figs. 8-9), and also some other (stray) miniatures can be regarded as continuations of the old type (cat.nos. 40, 46, 53). The illustration of the Flight in the Paris manuscript was copied, as was in fact the whole cycle, from an illustrated manuscript of the *Roman d'Alexandre en prose* (p.112).

The episode in the *Roman d'Alexandre* is very likely an insertion by the final redactor of this long epic, Alexandre de Paris. The story is treated in an original way as a dangerous adventure that truly transcends human limitations (p.94-99). The earliest surviving illustration is found in a Tournai manuscript of the middle or the third quarter of the 13th c. (cat.no. 56; Fig.10). Strangely enough it shows four eagles, and not eight griffins, as mentioned in the text. These peculiarities are probably due to inaccurate copying of a slightly older model. But for the rest the image follows the texts fairly closely in that it shows a construction, a *chambre* or *chambrete* as it is called in the text, with a window out of which Alexander looks upward. However, once a pictorial type was established, it was copied again and again, so that finally only the general lay-out of the original was preserved. This process (which can also be observed in the illustrated manuscripts of the *Roman d'Alexandre en prose* and Enikel's 'Alexander') accounts for the fact that in the illustrations in 14th c. manuscripts Alexander is not shown as enclosed by his *chambre*, but as a half-figure in a basket-like vehicle (cat.nos. 58-59, 63; Fig. 14). An intermediate stage is represented by the miniature on f81r of the famous MS Bodley 264 in Oxford. The vehicle still conveys the idea of a house-like construction, but it does not enclose Alexander any more: it seems as if he is standing in the courtyard (Fig. 12).

Essential for the interpretation of the illustrations is the fact that Alexander is always represented in a turned pose. Compared to the old Romanesque tradition this enlivening gives the illustrations a narrative aspect. It marks a theme of action that parallels the treatment of the in episode in the text.

MS Bodley 264 is the only *Roman d'Alexandre* manuscript to have a very long picture cycle (cat.no. 54). The episode of the Flight is illustrated with three miniatures and a historiated initial, executed by two different hands (Figs. 11-13). Although the additional illustrations do not depict the complex situations described in the text exactly, the choice of the subjects and the way they are represented underscore the tenor of the text.

The illustrations of the Flight in two manuscripts of the *Roman d'Alexandre en prose* also follow the type of the epic *Roman d'Alexandre* (cat.nos. 42-43), but on the

whole the illustrated manuscripts of the former work show a different type of image, since the treatment of the episode differs from that of the epic. The anonymous author of the *Roman d'Alexandre en prose*, an adaptation of the *Historia de Preliis I²*, clearly holds a positive view of Alexander and glorifies him as the special favourite of God. These characteristics also apply to the episode of the Flight: it is the expression of Alexander's world-rulership *gratia Dei* (p.108-111). To convey this meaning the first illustrators modelled the Flight after the image of Christ's Ascension (cat.nos. 30, 32, 39; Fig. 16). The later illustrations follow the basic lay-out of this new type of image (cat.nos. 37, 41, 66, 74; Fig. 17), but at the beginning of the 15th c. profound iconographic and stylistic changes come to the fore. The artist of the miniature in MS Royal 20 B XX coupled a fresh reading of the text with the use of the naturalistic devices of early 15th c. Parisian miniature painting. As a consequence the Flight is changed from a theme of state into a theme of action (cat.no. 44; Fig. 18). The symbolism of the older type is lost and judging by its pictorial form the Flight is nothing but an adventure that could have happened in reality. The later illustrations in the *Roman en prose* show similar tendencies, if not in so rigorous a fashion as those in MS Royal 20 B XX (cat.nos. 28, 34; Fig. 19).

In the last French prose version of the legendary Alexander material, viz. Jean Wauquelin's *Histoire du bon roy Alixandre*, the episode was also changed. The account of the Flight follows that in the *Roman d'Alexandre en prose* very closely, but from minute differences it appears that it is nothing but an adventurous aerial exploration (text on p.213-214). Only two manuscripts include rather similar miniatures of the story, showing Alexander flying above an elaborate landscape setting with the army camp, where his soldiers stand watching him in amazement (cat.nos. 65, 68; Figs. 21-22).

Excursion 1 deals with one of the few Alexander cycles outside illustrated manuscripts to survive, viz. the two wall tapestries in the Palazzo Doria in Rome, commonly believed to be the remains of a set of six ordered by Philip the Good in 1459 from Pasquier Grenier of Tournai (cat.no. 85). After a discussion of the scenes depicted, the view that they were based upon Wauquelin's *Histoire* is shown to be highly inaccurate. Those responsible for the selection of the scenes may have known some of the stories from Wauquelin but also from the more widely known *Roman en prose*; moreover, they must have used additional sources as well. The scheme of the Flight follows the type established in the illustrated manuscripts of the *Roman en prose*, but the figure of God the Father above is an addition. An additional scene showing the barons greeting Alexander at his return has no parallel in French or Flemish manuscripts (Fig. 23). The exact content of these scenes can be explained by reference to the pertinent passage in the *Roman d'Alexandre en prose* or Wauquelin.

Chapter 3 deals with the illustrations in the manuscripts of German texts. A clear tradition for the illustration of the Flight is only found in manuscripts of Jans Enikel's *Weltchronik* or of other versified world chronicles containing his Alexander section. Enikel treats the story in a negative way: Alexander is rebuked by a voice from heaven ordering him to descend. Back on earth it takes him a year to return to his army. When he finally arrives he is at first refused admittance because he looks like a beggar. The rejection in heaven is followed by a rejection on earth (p. 139-143). In the manuscripts the episode is always illustrated with two scenes that convey its negative treatment in the text in a clear fashion. The first scene, as depicted in

the oldest manuscript, the narrative scene shows a voice, who orders the world sea and soldiers. His purpose is that he is returned.

The illustrations ultimately go back to these is a *Histoire* (cat.no. 26). Here the episode is in the foreground. The frontal position suggests that the

The last German manuscript, Hartlieb in his *Weltchronik*, does not show it as a marvel. It was one manuscript, (cat.no. 51; Fig. 24). The picture fragment gives the impression that the development of the episode produced in the beginning of the 15th century Western art.

In Excursion 2, viz. the Alexander weavers' guild. Kaltenhofer in 1901 likely based on the Alexander is depicted like the other episodes on the ceiling show dealing here with several traditions, not necessarily

The Epilogue discusses a beautiful woodcut illustration in Western art due to the criticism upon the veracity of the story as lies. One writer, Quintus Curtius, concocted by p

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the oldest manuscripts, is in fact an expansion of the old Romanesque scheme into a narrative scene. Above the dialogue is shown between Alexander and the heavenly voice, who orders him to return to earth, which is represented as a circular island in the world sea below (Fig. 25). The second scene shows Alexander in rags before his soldiers. His position on the right rather than on the left of the picture indicates that he is returning (Fig. 28).

The illustrations of the Flight in a few manuscripts of other German texts ultimately go back to the type described above (p.152-157). The most interesting of these is a *Historienbibel* manuscript in Berlin, dating from ca. 1460 (cat.no. 31; Fig. 26). Here the earth has been expanded into a real 'world landscape' with the sea in the foreground. Parallel to this attention given to the landscape setting Alexander's frontal position has shifted into a three quarters view, so that there is a clear suggestion that he is moving in a three-dimensional space.

The last German treatment of the legendary Alexander material is that by Johann Hartlieb in his *Histori von dem grossen Alexander* (early 1450s). As opposed to Enikel Hartlieb does not treat the episode of the Flight in a negative way, but simply as if it were a marvellous aerial exploration undertaken out of curiosity (p.157-159). Only one manuscript, produced in Augsburg in 1455, includes an illustration of the Flight (cat.no. 51; Fig. 29). It is fairly simple: Alexander flies diagonally above a landscape. The picture frame cuts off the bait Alexander is holding, so that one gets the impression that he is about to move out of sight. This almost symbolizes the further development of the theme: the later illustrated manuscripts and incunabula, all produced in Augsburg too, leave out the picture of the Flight (p.161-162), and at the beginning of the 16th c. the image has disappeared completely from the repertoire of Western art.

In Excursion 2 another 15th c. cycle outside illustrated manuscripts is discussed, viz. the Alexander scenes on the wooden ceiling from the house of the Augsburg weavers' guild. The ceiling, together with the panelling, was painted by Peter Kaltenhofer in 1457 (cat.no. 84). The Alexander scenes, including the Flight, were very likely based on an illustrated *Weltchronik* or *Historienbibel* manuscript (Fig. 24). Alexander is depicted again on the panelling as one of the Nine Worthies. Here he is, like the other eight, an example of justice and good rulership, whereas the scenes on the ceiling show him in a rather negative way. This is no contradiction, as we are dealing here with two different traditions. As in Medieval literature there coexist several traditions, each with its own conception of Alexander, and the one tradition is not necessarily related to the other.

The Epilogue discusses the reasons why the legend was not represented any more; the beautiful woodcut by Schäufelein, dating from ca. 1516, is virtually the last representation in Western art (cat.no. 82). The disappearance of the legend in art is partly due to the critical attitude that arose in the course of the 15th c. Doubts were cast upon the veracity of the Medieval Alexander stories, and they were finally condemned as lies. One writer, Vasque de Lucène, in the prologue to his French translation of Quintus Curtius (completed in 1468) even explicitly refers to the Flight as a *fable* concocted by people ignorant of the nature of things.

One would look in vain for such an attitude during the Early and High Middle Ages. There were certainly writers who doubted the veracity of wonderful stories such as the Flight. They did not reject them, however, but continued to tell them hoping

that their audience would find pleasure in them. And pleasant they undoubtedly were. But they could also be given a sense and meaning. As long as such stories as the Flight still had such a meaning, their veracity was less important. For writers such as Vasque, however, these stories were apparently so devoid of any sense that they could be nothing else but nonsense.

Seen against this background the developments in the representations of the Flight during the 15th c. become significant. Moralistic and symbolic meanings gradually disappear, but the realistic rendering of the subject comes more and more to the fore. A parallel tendency can be seen in the 15th c. literary treatments of the story, as those by Hartlieb and Wauquelin. The story ended up by being so realistically conceived, that the possibility was given to doubt its veracity. And that is exactly what happened. An impossible story about a historical figure, however, was unacceptable, and the Flight ceased to be represented.

The disappearance of the story from the visual arts does not imply, of course, that interest in Alexander had ceased to exist altogether. On the contrary, but the subjects now depicted were inspired by the Classical, and consequently more trustworthy, sources (Quintus Curtius, Arrian, Plutarch). The story of the Flight itself was also far from forgotten. Thanks to chapbooks editions of Medieval Alexander texts many have must have been familiar with it, even in the 17th c.

In the course of the 18th c. the story must have sunk into complete oblivion, but in the next century scholars came to know it again, when the Medieval Alexander texts, so severely condemned as 'unveracious' by Vasque de Lucène and others, were being edited and studied anew. Naturally, the Medieval Alexander legends are not veracious - but that is exactly why a story like the Flight is so interesting today. Not so much the story as such is fascinating, but rather what it tells us about the imagination of the Middle Ages.

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